

TESTIMONY OF FEYERA NEGERA SOBOKSSA

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My name is Feyera Negera Sobokssa and I live in the District of Columbia. I am a torture survivor from Ethiopia who received political asylum in 2001. I first want to say how pleased I am to represent TASSC and to speak before the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission about my own experience with torture and the horrible human rights situation in Ethiopia.

Article 5 in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights says “No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.” Countries all over the world, including my country of origin, Ethiopia, are guilty of violating this basic human right. Today thousands of Ethiopians are suffering under the brutal one-party dictatorship of the EPRDF (Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front).

The Oromo, Ethiopia’s largest ethnic group, is a particular target of the ruling party. The Oromos are Ethiopia’s largest ethnic group and have their own language and culture. According to a recent report by Amnesty International, thousands of Oromos –farmers, teachers, medical professionals and others -- are imprisoned just for being Oromo. They are arrested and kept in military camps—many of them are tortured just like I was over 20 years ago because I am Oromo.

My story begins when I was a young boy. I remember the government attacking Oromo farmers like my father because he refused to give them one-third of his crops and cattle. The Oromo language was also banned in schools, government offices and the courts. When I was in elementary school, I saw Oromo boys beaten for speaking our language. Many students were forced to change their Oromo names to Amharic. And today, the ruling elites in Ethiopia still call Oromos “Galla” to make them feel inferior. “Galla” is a derogatory word used to dehumanize Oromos and to keep them in a low position.

When I was 19, I began studying accounting at Addis Ababa University and I got a job with Ethiopian Airlines. I took a risk and agreed to xerox some publications about the Oromos to distribute. If I had been caught, I would have been tortured and executed. Imagine if the U.S. government would kill you just for reading a book or article.

A military junta called the Derg overthrew Haile Selassie in 1974. Then in 1991, the Derg was replaced by the EPRDF headed by Meles Zenawi. In 1991, government agents kidnapped and drugged me because I was caught holding a book called "History of the Galla." The EPRDF took me to a military camp and forced me to drink something; then I remember starting to dance in front of the soldiers. I believe they gave me some kind of hallucinogenic drug to read my mind. And I was just an accountant for Ethiopian Airlines; I was not involved in any political organization at the time.

The worst torture happened to me on December 27, 1995. I was on my way home to my wife who was pregnant with my first child. Security forces forced me into a car, took me to a military camp and started asking me questions about people I knew. Then they inflicted a terrible kind of torture called "Code Number Eight." It is used frequently by the Ethiopian government because it is extremely painful, and does not leave marks on the victims. They tied my elbows together and nearly broke my chest by tying my arms together with a very strong, thin plastic rope. They did the same to my legs. Then, they suspended me on a metal object and kept me like that for long hours during those two horrible nights.

It was so painful I remember asking the security forces, who were carrying Kalashnikov rifles, to kill me. They said "We don't want you to die, we want you to suffer." Then they went to my home, broke the door down and beat up my little ten-year old sister. They took the money I had, family pictures and photographs, journals, books and magazines. They came back to me, and started asking me questions about the photographs, the people in the pictures and why I was collecting Oromo-related publications.

After suffering this horrible trauma, I could not think about anything else and I decided to leave my job and escape from Ethiopia. But then security forces captured me again in spring of 1996.

They took me to a secret prison and kept me in a dark room for about 3 months in solitary confinement. I could not change my clothes, take a shower or talk to anyone. There was no toilet; they let me go to a latrine twice a day in the dark, once at dawn and again after sunset. There was nothing to read, no mattress to sleep on; I often had to urinate at a corner on the floor. This was psychological torture; they would take me to an unknown place and said they were going to execute me. One of the security agents said, "just wait, you are going to be executed." Because of these death threats, every day I was waiting for this to happen.

My family did not know whether I was dead or alive. My family and friends reported my disappearance to the International Committee of the Red Cross, so they transferred me to Maekalawi, widely known as one of the worst prisons in the world, where they kept me for 5 months. They finally took me to a phony court and released me in November 1996.

This kind of torture is still going on in Ethiopia. Four Oromos who had been in Maekelawi and are now living in the U.S. told me that prison officials tied heavy weights to their genitals.

I arrived in Washington DC in December 2000 and received political asylum right away. To give meaning to my shattered life as a result of such barbaric torture techniques, I joined the Torture Abolition and Survivors Support Coalition (TASSC) in 2004 and became a Truth Speaker to create awareness about the impact of torture on victims and their families. I want to thank the American people and government for protecting survivors. I have spoken out frequently against torture—speaking out helps me through the healing process, which will go on my entire life. I want to give a voice to those who cannot speak, who are still being brutalized and tortured by their governments.

Now I would like to talk about what the United States Congress can do to combat torture and human rights violations in Ethiopia. A recent Washington Post editorial called on the U.S. to stop sending millions of dollars to Ethiopia because of its horrible human rights abuses. The U.S. should publicly demand that Ethiopia free political prisoners, stop arresting and torturing Oromos and other Ethiopians, and allow real free elections monitored by international observers within two years. Everyone knows the May 2015 Ethiopian election was a sham election and just a way for the EPRDF to pretend it is a democracy and still maintain absolute power.

The U.S. provides hundreds of millions of dollars in development aid to Ethiopia every year. But who is this development for? Development must be people-centered, the money is being abused by the ruling party, they reward their supporters and penalize the opposition. The U.S. Congress must pay attention to how this money is being used and give more of a voice to independent civil society groups.

President Obama is going to Ethiopia in July, and will also visit the headquarters of the African Union in Addis Ababa. Now is the time for him to raise the issue of human rights not only for Ethiopia but for the entire African continent. How can the United States claim to be a world leader if it does not let African dictators know they have to change their behavior—the culture of impunity has to end.